

HOW TO CHOOSE A GUITAR

There are a great many factors to consider when buying a guitar, especially for the parents of the beginning student. Here is a list of decisions to consider:

- + Acoustic or Electric
- + Steel String or Classical (Spanish—Nylon String)
- + Size and Comfort
- + Ease of Playing
- + Quality vs. Price
- + Ancillaries
 - ❖ Amplifier
 - ❖ Patch Cord
 - ❖ Tuners
 - ❖ Picks
 - ❖ Strings

Acoustic or Electric

The question to be asked here is: What kind of music does your student/child desire to play? If he/she wants to play rock music in the classic rock style of Led Zeppelin or even in the modern style of Imagine Dragons, then you may want to consider an electric guitar. If he/she wants to master a more mellow style in the mode of Taylor Swift or Ed Sheeran, then an acoustic guitar is probably more in order. However, wanting to play rock music does not preclude starting out on an acoustic. Electric guitars will be addressed in a separate article.



Acoustic: Steel String or Classical

Acoustic guitars come in a number of styles and body shapes, but the most basic decision to be made is whether to play a steel string instrument or one in the classical, or Spanish, tradition. Steel string guitars use strings made out of exactly that—steel. The two “high” strings—the high E and high B-strings are plain steel. The low E, A, D, and G-strings are made of a steel core wrapped with bronze (electric guitar wound strings are wrapped with nickel). Steel string guitar yield a bright, snappy, stringy sound with an extreme high and low end tone spectrum. Classical guitars are strung with strings that are basically nylon. The high E and B-strings are plain nylon, while the low E, A, D, and G-strings are a nylon core wrapped with a combination bronze/nickel alloy. The classical guitar sounds mellower than a steel string guitar. They have a nice round tone that is pleasing to the ear and a sensitive low end that many guitarists prefer, especially in the classical music field.

So what does this mean besides how the guitar sounds? Many beginning students find the steel strings a bit harder on their sensitive fingers. The nylon strings are broader and softer so they don’t “press” quite as hard into fingertips. However, there is a trade off. Nylon strings are broader in diameter than steel strings. Consequently the necks of classical guitars are noticeably wider than steel string guitars. This can be a concern for the student with smaller hands. They may find it more difficult to span the neck to finger chords efficiently.

One further word on the subject—in the case of either style, with a few weeks of steady practice, calluses will form on the ends of the students’ fingers and pain will no longer be an issue.

Size and Comfort

It is of the utmost importance that the instrument you choose for your child is size-appropriate. The student should be able to access the end of the neck easily with the left hand and position his/her hand conveniently over the sound hole with the right hand. Nothing will frustrate a young student faster than difficulty in reaching with either the left or the right hand.

Guitars of both genres come in three distinct sizes: Half Size, Three Quarter, and Full Size. Generally speaking half size guitars are specifically designed for very, very young students, usually between the ages of 5 and 7. Three quarter size guitars are designed for the pre-teenage market, students who have grown beyond first or second grade, but still haven't arrived at the "growth spurt" period in their lives. Full size guitars are suitable for 12-year olds to teenagers.

A cautionary word: Because half size and three quarter size guitars are specialty items, you may find that a good quality guitar of this size may have a corresponding price point.

Additionally, acoustic guitars come in three different body styles that contour to the body of the student in different fashions: Classical, Dreadnought, and Jumbo (see below). For most beginning students I don't recommend the Jumbo style. While it delivers a huge sound spectrum, many young students find the huge body shape difficult to manage.

The best advice I can give here is to have the student try several guitars and determine for himself or herself which one feels the most comfortable.

Body Styles



Ease of Playing

The considerations here include not just the "feel" of the instrument against the body of the student, but also how easy or difficult it is to "fret" the strings; that is, how much effort does it take to push the string to the neck on the frets. The vertical distance between the height of the string and the wood of the neck is called "action." The idea here is to find an action that is comfortable, not too high, but also, not too low. Action that is set too low on a guitar may make it easier to play, but if the string comes too close to the frets it results in an unpleasant audio element that we refer to as "fret buzz," which is to be avoided at all costs.

Quality vs. Price

This is the difficult part of the discussion for most parents. Many factors come into play when considering how much to spend on what will initially be a student model guitar.

- Will my child "stick with it?"
- What determines a "quality" instrument?
- How much should I spend?
- Should I buy online?
- Where are the best music stores?

I recommend a good discussion with the prospective student in order to find out exactly how serious he/she is about learning guitar. It should be stressed that learning any instrument means a certain amount of time and effort, both in the classroom and at home, is required. Studying music is just like any other subject. The student will get out of the classes exactly how much time and effort they put into paying attention and fostering a good practice effort.

In terms of quality I always suggest going with a well-known brand name. The "famous name" guitar manufacturers have been around as long as they have because they have a reputation for great quality, both

in the academic world as well as the professional arena. Additionally, many well-known guitar makers have discovered that targeting the student demographic can be very lucrative and consequently have designed product lines targeted specifically for the beginning guitarist. Among the well-known guitar manufacturers that offer the student model are the following companies:

- Fender
- Yamaha
- Taylor
- Martin
- Hohner
- Mitchell
- Takamine
- Jasmine
- Sigma
- Cordoba (classical guitars only)

Of these, the manufacturers with the highest price points are Martin and Taylor. Some of the features to look for are:

- A straight neck with a truss rod (a metal rod inside the neck for straightening in case of warping (which is a natural occurrence over the years))
- Smooth frets: Frets should not be too high or too flush to the neck and should be machined at each end so they are smooth and flush with the diameter of the neck.
- Tuners (tuning pegs/machine heads) that turn smoothly and easily
- Intonation: The notes should stay in tune up and down the neck
- Tonewood: Most guitar makers use spruce for the top of the body (soundboard), but the sides and back are made of various woods such as maple, alder, birch, ash, and mahogany.
- A decent hard finish on the wood of the body—Watch for scratches and nicks
- Bridge and Fretboard are usually made of rosewood. If not, inquire what the materials are.

Many parents are reluctant to spend the money it takes to buy a quality instrument, not knowing how long their child may stick to learning the instrument. I would caution against sacrificing quality in the name of price. While bargain basement shopping at garage sales or online may save a few dollars, often a so-called budget guitar will not have the lasting quality of a name instrument, nor will they usually carry any kind of decent guarantee against premature aging or disrepair.

On the whole, I am of the opinion that spending somewhere in the neighborhood of \$100.00 will fetch a decent quality guitar for the duration of the student's learning process. In addition, many retail sources offer a guitar "package," which usually includes a gig bag (protective carrying case), a tuner, a set of strings and picks, and occasionally a strap. But a word of caution is in order—as with all purchases in life, if a deal sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

If the parent is unsure about the commitment of his or her child to learning the guitar, the option to rent a guitar is viable. Many parents prefer to rent a guitar for the duration of an 12-week (2-month) course, at the end of which if the student decides that guitar is not what they want to do, a minimum amount of money has been spent. However, be advised, in some music stores rental rates can be fairly steep and it almost becomes a wash to spend the money on purchasing the instrument, at which point it can be resold if so desired.